

Written Testimony
House Government Reform Subcommittee on Federalism and the Census
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Rayburn House Office Building
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Good Morning, Mr. Chair and members of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Federalism and the Census. My name is Idotha Bootsie Neal and I am President of Wright Dunbar, Inc.

Congressman Turner, it is a pleasure to testify before your subcommittee today. I would like to thank you for your interest and expertise in saving America's cities and working to preserve and restore historic buildings in our hometown. The leadership that you provided as Mayor of the City of Dayton helped to generate millions of dollars of investment within the core city. Thank you for your leadership and also for this opportunity to tell how historic preservation is making a huge difference in our community.

A Unique Legacy

There is a very unique neighborhood in the Midwest. The Wright-Dunbar Village in Dayton, Ohio. This is the neighborhood that taught the world how to fly and where through the power of the pen a foundation was laid for the Harlem Renaissance.

This neighborhood is where the Wright brothers invented the airplane and African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar began his career. And now... this significant historic legacy is helping to transform a formerly vacant and blighted urban neighborhood into one that supports families and businesses.

Wright Dunbar, Inc. is a community partner of the **Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park** and the **National Aviation Heritage Area**. The National Park is located in the heart of the Wright-Dunbar Business Village, thereby becoming an important catalyst for the redevelopment of the area and its positioning as a heritage tourism destination.

Just 10 years ago, nobody would have considered visiting the Wright-Dunbar area, much less locating their business or residence there. As the site of devastating race riots in the mid-1960s, the Wright-Dunbar community suffered significant disinvestment until the 1990s. Vacant buildings and homes and high crime made it difficult for some people to see the vision of a walkable, vibrant urban community. Today, those dilapidated homes and the perception of high crime have begun to give way to rehabilitated historic buildings and homes, new construction, and the return of businesses and residents.

Challenges/ Accomplishments

Wright Dunbar, Inc. and the **City of Dayton** realized early that private sector was not going to immediately invest in the redevelopment of the area. The City offered property tax

abatements and other incentives to encourage builders to renovate and/or rebuild homes that fit with the historic neighborhood. Now the surrounding neighborhoods are attracting a diverse mix of families, young professionals and retirees.

On the commercial side, Wright Dunbar, Inc. invested \$2.9 million dollars of federal funding for the acquisition and stabilization of 9 historic properties in the area. **Community Development Block Grant** funding and **Federal Appropriations** have made the buildings stable, secure and dry. However, due to the extreme deterioration of the buildings, a financial gap still exists before the buildings are ready for tenant occupancy.

Wright Dunbar, Inc. is laying the proper foundation for a capital campaign that will provide the gap financing needed for the build out of the properties. The use of **historic and new market tax credits** will be critically important in this next phase of development as Wright Dunbar, Inc. will bring together a variety of funding tools and programs to complete each project. Already, **Community Development Block Grant** funding has enabled our organization to develop a strategic plan and materials that will greatly aid in the marketing of our properties and also our fundraising efforts.

Though urban revitalization does not happen overnight, Wright Dunbar, Inc. and our partners have already begun to see very positive results. Since our founding in 2002, a \$3.3 million investment in Wright Dunbar, Inc. has leveraged over \$12.2 million in community investment. When we include the investment from our area partners, the amount of generated investment increases dramatically to \$76 million. That is over a 6 to 1 return on investment. Pledged **Transportation funding** will transform the Wright-Dunbar Village into a walkable and inviting community, slowing down traffic that was, for many years, encouraged to leave the city as quickly as possible. Wright Dunbar, Inc. and our partners were recently awarded a Preserve America grant, which will help us ascertain the economic benefits of connecting Dayton's heritage sites, particularly those sites connected with Dayton's Aviation legacy.

Wright Dunbar, Inc., is a certified **Main Street Community** in partnership with the **National Trust for Historic Preservation** and **Heritage Ohio**.

Historic Preservation and its tools form a powerful weapon against blight and vacant buildings in cities across America. Main Street communities and urban cities contain many of the stories that make America the unique and creative country that it is today. These stories are best told by maintaining and celebrating our built environment.

Historic Preservation is also incredibly important in returning once useless buildings to the tax rolls, and creating places for businesses to provide new jobs. Additionally, returning to reclaim the urban core stops sprawl into our country's farmland.

To do this effectively, we need tools like **new market** and **historic tax credits**, **Community Development Block Grants**, and **federal appropriations**. Matching grants like **Preserve America** enable local groups to leverage federal funding for the good of the community. The importance of these tools to the revitalization of American cities cannot be overstated.